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AUTHOR Spaeth, Elizabeth A.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

There are several variables at work in any piece of writing and some combinations of these variables can cause serious problems for some students. The first area where two of these variables occur is in the notion of what a college education is. The subject matter to be learned is one variable in what education means, and the second variable is that part of each individual student which brings the knowledge to life. The second area is the student's disposition toward writing. Some students come to a writing center willing and able to accept valid criticism of their writing. Most students who seek help at a writing center, however, lack feelings of self-worth and do not take criticism well. The third area resides in the nature of composition--the act of writing is an act of discovery. Certain combinations of these variables can cause extreme distress for some students. If students whose sense of self is weak are asked to write about grave personal experiences, then, in the act of writing, realizations can be reached which may overwhelm the student. Unless writing labs and composition teachers have training in dealing with the psychological repercussions of what this kind of writing can uncover, it is best that such assignments be left alone. (RS)

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TUTORING WRITING FROM THE PSYCHIATRISTS COUCH

PRESENTATION FOR MIDWEST WRITING CONFERENCE

October 6, 1990

Radisson, St. Cloud, MN

Presenters: Elizabeth A. Spaeth, Writing Lab director

Tutors: Dawn Currier, Suzanne Otte

Former Tutor: Catherine Latterell

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Our panel is entitled "Tutoring Writing From the Psychiatrist's Couch." The subject occurred to us after having several tutoring sessions last year in which our clients broke down crying or became so emotional about their subjects that it overpowered their ability to think clearly enough to write. We decided that we should give some attention to situations like these. What do we do, we wondered, when, in the act of writing, a person realizes the intensity or magnitude of a personal problem and is overwhelmed by it. Is there anything we can do as tutors to help? What kind of attention can we give to a student in distress? How do we address the student's paper under such circumstances?

Our presentation will take the following form:

1. I will briefly explain what I see as the variables at work in a piece of writing. I will point out why I think some combinations of these variables can cause serious problems for some students.
2. The tutors will give some examples of such problems and

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discuss them with you.

3. Open the discussion for a wider understanding of what we can do when we find ourselves confronted with such situations.

I would like to begin by clarifying several variables at work in any piece of writing and then show how certain combinations of these variables can be the spark for trouble.

The first area where two of these variables occur is in the notion of what a college education is. The point of education, I think, is to expand the individual; There is a body of knowledge (the subject matter of a discipline) teachers would like students to learn, but learn to understand in a way so that they are able to make connections between their own experiences and those of their intellectual ancestors. What happens in the classroom must be connected to life. What is to be learned must make sense. Students are asked to reflect, often to search with the eye of the mind into the self and with introspection to understand themselves or to bring meaning form their own experiences in order to render a text meaningful. Some of this introspection requires self disclosure. But it is an important part of learning to probe beyond what is easily accessible, even to be disturbed or jarred out of one's complacency in order to be able to see. The very word "educate" means to lead out.

If, therefore, the subject matter to be learned is one

variable in what education means, the second is that part of each individual student which brings the knowledge to life--her experiences, thoughts, insights. Each student's own personal background has prepared her for a special way of making the material at hand her own. It is this individual, personal approach that makes learning successful. It is the personal involvement plus the knowledge to be learned that produces education.

The second area that helps us to define this problem is what I call a student's disposition toward writing. There seem to be, roughly speaking, two variables in this area. These are well known to all of us who work in writing centers, that is, the measure of confidence a student has in his own ability to write.

Some students who come looking for help with their writing already possess it; the confidence I speak of is the kind that shores up a person's venture into the struggle to find words to fit an idea. It is a confidence that says:

Here are my thoughts: I've given my best to them. I will defend them because I have considered and weighed their worthiness--yet if I see a weakness in them, something I haven't anticipated, I will reconsider. My sense of myself will not be shaken in such revision for my self-worth is not at stake in a re-evaluation of my ideas. I am free to rethink this idea and rewrite.

Sadly enough, however, students like these are not in the majority of those who come through our doors. Rather isn't this following description more the norm, more descriptive of what many students think and some make bold to say:

My writing is me and if you criticize my writing, you're finding fault with me. I have put all of me into this piece, it's not much, but it's all I am. If you pick it apart, I will be close to devastated. The defenses they put up to help ward off an expected attack on their writing go something like this:

1. My writing has never been very good
2. I can't write
3. This really isn't a very good idea and I knew it wouldn't stand up very well
4. I don't have time to make this any better
5. I don't care anyway
6. Or just moods greet the tutor: silence, nervous laughter, anger, helplessness

I think the sense of self worth a student has is a very important variable as we try to understand this problem.

And the third area I'd like to mention resides in the very nature of composition. It is a variable all by itself. It is extremely important because it is what the act of writing is -- an act of discovery. We write in order to know what we think. Our own words teach us something we didn't already know or only knew slightly. We discover what we mean, we gain insights into

our own thoughts, motives, intentions, desires, things we have done, and things we have had done to us. I believe we have all experienced this happening as we write. We know but writing makes us realize, makes us know in a new way.

Now what happens when we take certain combinations of these variables and put them together. Take an assignment that steps outside of the subject matter and asks from the student for an exploration of self. Many times assignments of this kind come in the guise of writing about an experience that has strongly affected one. The assignment asks for a pe[illegible]n search. Many students are able to deal with such an assignment--they are mature enough to be able to distance themselves from any harmful effects an experience may have had or, as we say, they have "worked through" the experience. Others know how to steer clear of emotional trouble spots writing superficially to avoid confrontation with self. Yet there is a number of students who uncover great difficulty in writing about such topics.

The student must write about the self; and yet if one's sense of self is weak in its perception of its worth; and then in the act of writing realizations can be reached which may overwhelm the student. The connection between the act of discovery that writing can invite and what happens to a student who isn't prepared to deal with what her writing has disclosed, seems to me to be at the heart of this problem.

Our writing center witnessed too many students being asked to write about grave problems.

The Writing Lab tutors gave some examples of situations where this trouble occurred and a discussion with the audience took place. One student was a good writer but when writing about the death of her younger sister, her writing fell apart and the teacher, with many misgivings, gave her a C on the paper. Is the "C" we asked, then to be construed as an evaluation of the worth of her experience? One Writing Lab director, when helping a student having difficulty finding something to write about for a personal experience paper, had suggested to her, "Well, I tried to commit suicide three times; would that be something to write about?" As we discussed the dilemma, a consensus seemed to form, seeing such direct personal assignments as the culprit. Textbooks include segments on personal writing and authors, who have had success in their own lives with such writing, seem to think it is the wise thing for everyone to do. However, unless Writing Labs and Composition teachers have training in dealing with the psychological repercussions of what this kind of writing can uncover, it is best we leave such assignments alone. We all agreed.